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"Where's Barnum?":
Skepticism in Antebellum America

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"Where's Barnum?":
Skepticism in Antebellum America

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2015

Abstract

"Where's Barnum?": Skepticism in Antebellum America

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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Antebellum Americans experienced rapid economic, social, political, and religious changes. This report argues that P.T. Barnum's advertisements, traveling exhibits, and American Museum instilled pecuniary skepticism into his audience. More specifically, Jacksonian era Americans were learning to navigate both business and personal relationships that were fraught with potential fraudulence. This report also contends that Barnum made the practice of pecuniary skepticism—that is, unmasking the fraud—a middle class value. In doing so, Barnum inculcated a skeptical worldview into the antebellum middle classes, paving the way for the widespread acceptance of more radical forms of skepticism in the twentieth century.

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INTRODUCTION

Antebellum Americans were anxious. On the one hand, men and women coming of age in the Jacksonian period remembered the political paranoia of their elders, who worried about tyrants and demagogues robbing their liberties. On the other hand, the Jacksonian generation was adapting to a new economic system in which business partners were no longer friends and neighbors, but potentially disingenuous strangers. Phineas Taylor Barnum embodied antebellum American anxiety over both the demagogue and the conman, but he did so ambiguously. By intentionally and publicly walking a fine line between outright quackery and legitimate business at a time when people were struggling to delineate the two, Barnum created an epistemological space in which people, and more specifically the working class, could practice unmasking a con-artist, religious demagogue, or religio-scientific humbugger. Through creating this gray area, and teaching the public how to discern the legitimate from the illegitimate, Barnum helped make unmasking a deeply rooted theme in American culture.

This chapter argues that P.T. Barnum's advertisements, traveling exhibits, and his American Museum instilled pecuniary skepticism into his audience. Although pecuniary literally refers to money, nineteenth century scholar Thorstein Veblen argued that the "basis on which good repute in any highly organized industrial community ultimately rests is pecuniary strength."[1] In that vein, I use pecuniary to refer to the anxiety Antebellum Americans felt as they struggled to come to grips with changes in American

[1] Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class,* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004 [1899]), 47.

society, particularly in the interconnected realms of commerce and class. Jacksonian-era Americans were learning to navigate a changing economic system in which business and personal relationships were fraught with potential fraudulence.[2] Barnum existed at the fringes of capitalist society, inhabiting liminal spaces between legitimate business and fraud, between high class and low class. From this nebulous socio-economic position, Barnum simultaneously embodied middle class ideologies and highlighted their boundaries, training people to be skeptical in social, economic, and religious spheres.

Barnum was, first and foremost, a businessman. As a result, he trained the emerging middle class to be skeptical about religious, commercial, and social situations through business. The case studies below all involve a monetary exchange: visitors paid to see Barnum's exhibitions and expected to get something in return. Entering into a business agreement with Barnum inducted customers into the same liminality he occupied. Paying to see a Barnum exhibit was simultaneously a model of capitalist behavior and a warning to beware of quackery. Thus, pecuniary skepticism was an embodied practice in which the working class, through business dealings, learned to beware of social, economic, and religious fraud. Because Barnum appealed specifically to the upwardly mobile working class and used business savvy as a means to train them in middle class behavior, this chapter also contends that Barnum made the practice of pecuniary skepticism a middle class value.

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[2] Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). Chapter one describes the antebellum obsession with the conman and the fraud.

This essay attempts to reconstruct the middle class worldview in which Barnum participated by looking closely at the material ways in which it was enacted. After situating Barnum and skepticism in history, I offer a discussion of the FeeJee Mermaid, after which I discuss the significance of the American Museum in general. Providing thick description of the mermaid and the American Museum reveals that Barnum successfully tapped into powerful cultural currents in Jacksonian America. Inviting visitors to participate in exercises of discernment helped inculcate skepticism into emerging middle class. The chapter concludes with another thick description, this time of a particular moment in the American Museum's theater. On this occasion, Barnum unmasked a rival museum's charlatanism, giving Barnum's audience a real-life example of how skepticism, credulity, and economics were intertwined.

Most scholars who study skepticism in the antebellum period focus on the beliefs and practices that inspired skepticism in the elite. In Lee Eric Schmidt's *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment,* he argues that "the postures of suspicion [of the veracity of supernaturalism], so basic to much of the modern study of religion, have a cultural history in which the literati learned their discriminating techniques through performance, exhibition, and playacting."[3] While his argument is convincing and well supported, Schmidt's account of elite skepticism does not historicize modern, popular skeptical movements because it is so limited to antebellum literati. Similarly, Christopher Grasso contended that the period 1835-1845 saw dramatic societal

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[3] In Lee Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 9-10.

change that resulted in denominational reorientation, radical departures from orthodox Christianity, and even the rejection of religion entirely.[4] Like Schmidt, Grasso traces some skeptical threads during this period, but he limits his study to a few movements, which inspired a handful of elite thinkers to embrace skepticism. John Lardas Modern's goal in *Secularism in Antebellum America* is perhaps closest to my own insofar as he seeks to understand the subtle foundations of secularism before it became a broad cultural movement. The key difference is that secularism is the absence of religion, while skepticism is the rejection of religion.[5] In sum, there have been no studies that attempt to uncover the popular roots of atheism, anti-theism, and other forms of skepticism.

Attention to P.T. Barnum shows that the elite were not the only ones practicing skepticism during the antebellum period. Similar to *Hearing Things*, this project examines how public rituals model skeptical thinking in order excavate the history of

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4 Christopher Grasso, "Skepticism and American Faith: Infidels, Converts, and Religious Doubt in the Early Nineteenth Century" in Journal of the Early Republic, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Autumn, 2002), 465-508 demonstrated that the subterranean "religious doubts" of the 18th and 19th C "have remained hidden because of the stories we tell about the country's religious past (466)." The lives of Charles Brownson, William Miller, Abner Kneeland, and Horace Mann, show that antebellum Americans came to skepticism through a variety of paths, including deism, freethought, and even freemasonry.

5 John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and Their Metaphors; Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby-Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary and Sex With The New Motive Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) took a subtler approach and argues that nineteenth century metaphysics, which were simultaneously rooted in the spiritual and the mechanical, mediated between religion and secularism. This metaphysical outlook, which crossed denominational lines, turned secularism into "a moral force, a connective tissue, a widely shared and massively intricate set of political and epistemological assumptions (282-283)." These assumptions allowed antebellum Americans to remove themselves from their own beliefs and to search for a true religion, and "in supplying both the ground and ingredients of the freedoms enacted in the name of true religion, secularism did not distort reality as much as it provided a particular kind of justification for it (9)."

modern "postures of suspicion." Unlike Schmidt, however, my goal here is *not* to trace the "postures of suspicion" of the literati; instead, it is to uncover how suspicion became the default worldview for an increasing number of twenty-first century working and middle class people. As I will argue in this chapter, the lower and emerging middle classes during the antebellum period learned skepticism and discernment through popular performances and exhibitions. Unlike their upper class counterparts who learned philosophical skepticism, these women and men learned a pecuniary skepticism that was as important for their day-to-day economic lives as it was for their spiritual lives.

Since each of the scholars listed above looked at different forms of religious skepticism, it is also important to delineate my use of the term "skepticism" as it applies to the antebellum period, and, more specifically to Barnum and his audience. Barnum himself was a devout Universalist raised in a strictly Calvinist society, and his audience was overwhelmingly Protestant. Barnum never questioned the necessity, importance, or legitimacy of religion *per se*, though like others of his time, he had particular opinions about which set of beliefs was closest to divine truth. As we will we see below, Barnum's museum appealed to evangelical Christians, and his audience would have been predominately religious. So, skepticism in this time and place did not mean doubting or questioning the existence of some sort of divinity or supernaturalism writ large. Additionally, many people—especially the lower classes who practiced occult traditions —believed that the supernatural realm could be influenced by human action.[6] Instead, the

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6 In Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 20-25, the author noted that there were some early modern

skepticism of the antebellum lower classes was a commercial skepticism, the kind of suspicion that sought to unmask the con-man and the charlatan in a new social and economic world.

In the introduction to *God and Mammon,* historian Mark Noll summarizes the recent research on religion and the market during the Jacksonian period. Scholars of this period agree that there is some connection between the meteoric rise of the market economy, the diversification and proliferation of Protestant denominations, and the spread of polite society through benevolent societies, although there is no consensus on the exact nature of the overlap. After surveying 130 pamphlets, sermons, and other Christian writings from 1790-1860, Noll noted that the Protestant authors "without sense of contradiction both enunciated traditional Christian exhortations about careful financial stewardship and simply took for granted the workings of an expanding commercial society."[7] Protestants in the antebellum period had a complex relationship with money, but it was most definitely a *relationship*; attitudes about money affected attitudes about religion and vice versa. This chapter assumes that attitudes about money during this period were not inherently secular, and as a result Barnum's pecuniary skepticism applied not only to commerce and class, but also to religion.

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atheists and agnostics, but it is hard to tell how many. Popular magic, the occult, and other forms of popular religion, on the other hand, were quite common among the laity. Jama Lazerlow's *Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995) makes a convincing argument that atheism and skepticism was in fact *un*common among the working class during this period.

[7] Mark Noll, ed., *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money, and the Market, 1790-1860* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002). introduction and 271-273.

In the same way that the marketplace affected religion, religious ideologies impacted the way people interacted with money. During this period, Americans were choosing their identities and alignments for themselves more than before. Significantly, Americans increasingly aligned themselves with Arminian denominations. Arminian theology, unlike Calvinism, gave the individual an important role in his or her own salvation. God, in other words, was no longer the sole decider of one's fate. Instead, just as was the case in business, one was saved or damned by one's own actions. By the time of the FeeJee Mermaid debuted in 1842, the nation had already witnessed the meteoric rise of the most popular and influential Arminian denomination: Methodism. What began in the early nineteenth century as a popular, working class religion full of exuberance and class-leveling behavior had, by the second generation of Methodists in the 1840s, shifted from these working class values to more middle class values including polite behavior and material acquisitiveness. Despite shifting class alignment, many Methodists' values remained the same: self-reliance, industriousness, and politeness, all of which aligned with middle class values.[8] Antebellum reform movements also exemplify the interconnectedness of the market and religion.

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8 On the rise of Methodism and its shift to middle class values: Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).. From the latter, In the 1830s and 1840s, "Methodism was becoming more settled, less countercultural, more middle class (184)." On the individualism, etc. in early Methodism, see Richard Carwardine, "'Antinomians' and 'Arminians': Methodists and the Market Revolution," In Melvin Stokes and Stephen Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Economic Expressions, 1800-1880* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

Temperance and family values were especially popular among Protestants at a time when the labor market was becoming increasingly unstable. Marxist historians interpret these social reform movements as means of controlling an unruly population.[9] More moderate historians argue that these movements arose naturally as a way of stabilizing an unprecedentedly mobile population.[10] Regardless of the motivation behind Protestant reform movements, it is undeniable that antebellum Protestants were profoundly affected by the changing economic system.[11] Religiously motivated temperance movements, for example, were responding to a deeply secular problem: increased mobility, joblessness, and economic stress inspired many men during this period to turn to drink.[12] Although some reformers used exclusively religious language to advocate for temperance, many reform-minded citizens—such as P.T. Barnum—also connected temperance to success in business.[13] Early Methodists inculcated self-reliance and hard work into their belief system, which led to material success in the later

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9 Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeepers Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

10 Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought : The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2007. http://UTXA.eblib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=430958), accessed May 05, 2015, 189.

11 Mark Noll's introduction to the edited volume *God and Mammon* discusses at some length the various theoretical approaches to the relationship between Protestantism and the American economic system in the antebellum period.

12 The first two chapters Paul E. Johnson's *Sam Patch* is an excellent case study in how the economic change during this period directly related to the spread of alcoholism in the northeast.

13 Sobriety is number five on Barnum's list of ten rules for success in business. Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs: or, Forty years' recollections of P. T. Barnum written by himself* (Hartford : J. B. Burr, 1869), 395. For the connection between insufficient morality and insufficient wealth, see Raymond Mohl, *Poverty in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 170.

generations. In sum, religion and the marketplace—here referring both to business and social class—were mutually influential in the antebellum period, and as a result of their interconnections, Barnum's pecuniary skepticism impacted more than American business or social culture; it impacted American religious culture.

Temperance typifies the connection not only between religion and wealth, but also behavior and class. Middle class reformers at this period advocated particular values: politeness, industriousness, and acquisition. In a world in which material success depended upon strength of character, reforming moral character was the only way to elevate the poor. Like other reformers, Barnum designed his exhibits and his museum to inculcate specific values into his clientele. Besides temperance, domesticity, and industriousness, however, Barnum taught that pecuniary skepticism was an important middle class value.

BARNUM, THE PRINCE OF HUMBUG

Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891) was born and raised in the small farming community of Bethel, Connecticut. He spent his formative years with an eclectic mix of merchants, Yankee peddlers, and practical jokers. His own grandfather, who gave Phineas Taylor his name, was an inveterate prankster and an important influence on the boy. Like an increasing number of rural families in the early nineteenth century, Barnum's family did not have farmland to pass on to their son. His father, an innkeeper, encouraged young Phineas to become a merchant. This suited Phineas fine, for he detested manual labor and found he was a shrewd businessman—a trait he attributed to the countless hours listening to his grandfather and other adults regale each other with stories of a well-played joke or savvy business deals.

Barnum gained more than business acumen or a sense of humor from these stories; he learned to unmask the pranksters, cons, and charlatans looking to make a profit off an unsuspecting victim. Barnum loved unmasking swindlers and pranksters before they could fool him. In his memoirs, he offers a number of anecdotes about unmasking various frauds, and he believed that this early training in Connecticut made him successful in New York City. Because of his background, amusement, business, value, and fairness were all interconnected in Barnum's life. His willingness to toe the line between honesty and trickery, value and fraud made him a celebrity in Jacksonian

America because traditional boundaries between trust and distrust, honesty and dishonesty were shifting.[14]

Some scholars of the Jacksonian era tend to overemphasize the extent to which the world was changing.[15] Looking back on this period a century later, dramatic changes in social norms, transportation, communication, and the economic system seem to have been a tidal wave of change that swept over the land and its people. But to fully appreciate Barnum's role in the history of American skepticism, it is helpful to remember that these changes were gradual, and the economic and physical landscape changed most drastically between generations. Young men and women left their family farms and moved to new towns or to cities. There, they grappled with shifting social mores, economic systems, and religious choices and built meaningful worldviews for themselves. Their children were raised with those worldviews. Instead of an overwhelming wall of change, we should visualize the changes of this period as mounting tide. Everyone was already wet, and there was still time to decide how best to weather the flood.

To stretch the flood metaphor, we can read Barnum as offering one way to swim at a time when everyone realized that the water was rising and some luminaries were

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14 Details of Barnum's early life can be found in the first chapter of his memoirs, P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (New York: Redfield, 1855).

15 Although Charles Sellers's *The Market Revolution in Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991 and Daniel Walker Howe's *What Hath God Wrought* are brilliant surveys of the period, they both cover so much history that change no longer appears gradual, but instantaneous. This same phenomenon appears in more specific studies, as well. Christopher Clark's "The Consequences of the Market Revolution in the American North" in Stokes and Conway, *The Market Revolution in America* comes to mind.

teaching their own methods. In more concrete terms, Barnum both exemplified and inculcated a particular way of seeing the world at a liminal time in U.S. history in which different epistemologies were both active and viable. Barnum, like the myriad advice manuals of clergymen, educators, and moralists, tried to instill values of politeness, hard work, and discernment into antebellum Americans lost in social and economic chaos.[16] By comparison, the Millerites, the Mormons, and utopian communities were all offering their own methods for coping with the changing social climate. The values Barnum and evangelical moralists espoused thrived in antebellum America because they overlapped with a variety of popular religious, economic, and political trends.

By the end of his life, Barnum's own name had become a catchphrase for unmasking the frauds of the world. If something seemed dubious, curious, or downright fake, people across the country would ask the same question: "Where's Barnum?"[17]

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16 Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 21.

17 Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 43.

THE FEEJEE MERMAID

Like Phineas Taylor Barnum himself—and indeed like many men in the mid-eighteenth century—Moses Kimball struggled to make a living in a radically changing economy. After losing his savings in not one but two land speculation bubbles, he worked odd jobs—sweeping floors, selling clothes or dry goods, even trying his hand at publishing. Kimball found his niche when he opened the Boston Museum and Gallery of Fine Arts, an exhibition hall for natural wonders, art, and live performances.[18]

In the early 1840s, rumors reached Kimball of a museum very similar to the Boston Museum. Kimball's business sense, honed by years of trial and error, told him that P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York need not be a threat, but could instead be a profitable partner. So, early in the summer of 1842, Moses Kimball packed an extraordinary curiosity in a box and took a train to New York to meet Barnum.

One can only imagine the meeting of these two great showmen. Both had experienced more than their share of failure, and both had fought their way to success in the very same field. Each was an expert salesmen, and the pitch that Kimball delivered as he lay the mysterious box on the table must have been one for the angels. Before opening the box, Kimball probably told Barnum of the object's origins—that a sailor bought it in Calcutta in 1817 and brought it to America. He undoubtedly claimed that the object in

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[18] The account of the FeeJee Mermaid that fallows can be found in both Barnum's own autobiographical texts *Life of Barnum* (1855), 231-242 and *Struggles and Triumphs* (1886), 129-131. The second account is much shorter because, as mentioned above, Barnum seemed to have regretted this humbug later in life. Secondary accounts can be found in more condensed versions in James Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 81-83.

this box would change Barnum's understanding of the natural world, for inside was a creature from fairytales: a mermaid.

It is impossible to know Barnum's immediate reaction to the three-foot long specimen that lay in the box. Later in his life he sometimes emphasized how convincing the mermaid was, averring that even under a microscope the transition from the humanoid torso to the fish's tail was seamless. At other times, though, Barnum expressed remorse the outright fraudulence of the mermaid. Whether he realized the mermaid was fake right away or it took him some time, he immediately saw that it was a potential gold mine. He and Kimball struck up a deal to share the mermaid and divvy up profits.

More than any other showmen of his time, Barnum "thoroughly understood the art of advertising," realizing that "every dollar sown in advertising would return in tens, and perhaps hundreds, in a future harvest."[19] He began his advertising campaign with a letter, ostensibly mailed from Montgomery, Alabama to the New York *Herald*. Along with incidental reports about weather, crops, and trade, there appeared news that a Dr. Griffin, agent of London's Lyceum of Natural History, had acquired a veritable mermaid, which had originated in FeeJee but been preserved in China. Dr. Griffin, the letter took care to point out, paid a high price for the curiosity. Soon, another letter from Charleston, South Carolina was published in a different paper. A third followed, this time from Washington.

Several days after a newspaper ran the third letter, Dr. Griffin himself checked into a Philadelphia hotel. At least, that was the name he used. In actuality, his name was

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[19] Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 118 and 130.

Levi Lyman, and he was Barnum's partner in an earlier exhibit: "The Greatest Natural Curiosity in the World" Joice Heth, an allegedly 161 year-old slave and former nurse to George Washington. Lyman-cum-Griffin played his role masterfully. He stayed several days in the hotel, affecting an English accent and exhibiting his fine, gentlemanly manners until he had built up a reputation for himself as both a gentleman and a man of science. As he packed his things to leave, he invited the hotel manager to his room to see something remarkable—the FeeJee Mermaid. After seeing the mermaid, the hotel manager asked if he might invite several editors to see it, too. The articles those authors published laid further groundwork for the main event in New York City.

In all likelihood, Barnum specifically chose Philadelphia because it was the best place both to drum up excitement for the mermaid and to establish its authenticity. Philadelphia, home of the famous Academy of Natural Sciences, was the most scientifically authoritative city of the day. Along with Dr. Griffin's *bona fides* as a gentleman scientist, excitement in Philadelphia would go a long way to establishing the mermaid's veracity.

Before the FeeJee Mermaid exhibit officially opened in New York City on August 8, 1842, she was all the buzz in New York City. Casual newspaper readers might have seen a letter from a southern naturalist describing a fantastic new discovery.[20] Or they may have seen articles from Philadelphia newspapers describing the editor's viewing of

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[20] Written, of course, by Barnum. As of yet, however, I have yet to find a copy of a newspaper with one of these letters. I do not believe, however, that Barnum would fabricate this particularly detail—he took great care in relating his triumphs.

the mermaid.[21] When the mermaid finally arrived in town, they may have seen a brief paragraph from the editor of the *New-York Daily Tribune*, in which the author related how he "tried hard to detect where or how some cute Yankee had joined a monkey's head to a fish's body, but had to give up, though our incredulity still lingers." The paragraph ends with a tantalizing invitation: "We should like to hear the opinion of better judges, after a rigid scrutiny."[22] Other articles informed readers that the "the whole town seems to be flocking to see the Mermaid," but warned that the mermaid was destined to depart New York, and the curious should make their way to the Concert Hall.[23] And this is to say nothing of the advertisements. There were advertisements of the mermaid's Concert Hall exhibition in the papers, of course, but even if one did not read the papers or somehow missed the ads it would have been hard to escape the mermaid, since paperboys were selling ten thousand pamphlets about the mermaid, and transparencies with fantastic images had cropped up around the Concert Hall.[24] With the newspaper ads, the pamphlets in circulation, and the physical advertisements all generating talk among New Yorkers, it would have been difficult to miss the coming of the FeeJee Mermaid.

New Yorkers had no idea that Barnum was behind all this advertising campaign. The mermaid was Barnum's second major exhibit, and he learned that hard work led to success. Moreover, only months before he purchased the American Museum on credit, and he was determined to pay off his loan as quickly as possible. He therefore worked

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21 As with the above, I am still looking for such letters.
22 *New-York Daily Tribune,* August 4, 1842, 2.
23 *New-York Daily Tribune,* August 12, 1842
24 Barnum, *Life of Barnum*, 236.

feverishly to "puff up" the mermaid in advertisements. He was behind all of the initial letters, he ordered the transparencies hung, and he printed the pamphlets for the paperboys to sell. The key to Barnum's advertising was that it did not *entirely* attempt to convince New Yorkers that the mermaid was a true natural wonder. Instead, Barnum carefully cultivated enough doubt about the mermaid's veracity to pique curiosity, but not so much doubt as to turn people off to the exhibit.

Barnum encouraged doubt by establishing the mermaid in the epistemological gray area between the possible and the impossible, the natural and the manmade.[25] He signaled the mermaid's liminality first by locating her in FeeJee, an exotic island on the periphery of American awareness. Second, Barnum's ad promised that the exhibit was "more for the gratification of public curiosity than for the purpose of gain." Such a claim invited the more critical readers to question its truthfulness. Finally, Barnum situated the mermaid in a cosmological gap. Although the FeeJee Mermaid was the main billing, visitors would also see the "ORNITHORNICUS [*ornithorhynchus anatinus,* or platypus], from New Holland, being the connecting [link] between Seal and Duck" and "various other animals forming connecting links in the great chain of Animated Nature."[26] The FeeJee Mermaid was exhibited some seventeen years before Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, and during this period many naturalists adhered to the classical belief that

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25 This concept comes from Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Clark describes these epistemological gray areas as "prerogative instances," or moments at which contemporaneous understanding fails to account for a phenomenon or object. As a result, supernatural or preternatural explanations fill the void until material explanations catch up.

26 *New-York Daily Tribune,* August 7, 1842, 3.

existence was an unbroken, linear chain of existence from God to the lowest of animals. The great chain of animated nature, as Barnum called it, was not a perfect system since it was sometimes difficult to connect disparate species. For example, what animal could connect sea creatures to birds? Why, the "ornithorhinchus," of course! By exhibiting the mermaid alongside the duckbilled platypus and missing links in the great chain of animated nature—including the flying fish—Barnum implied that the mermaid herself was a missing link. It was up to the reader to decide whether she connected monkey and fish or man and fish, or whether she was a just a humbug.

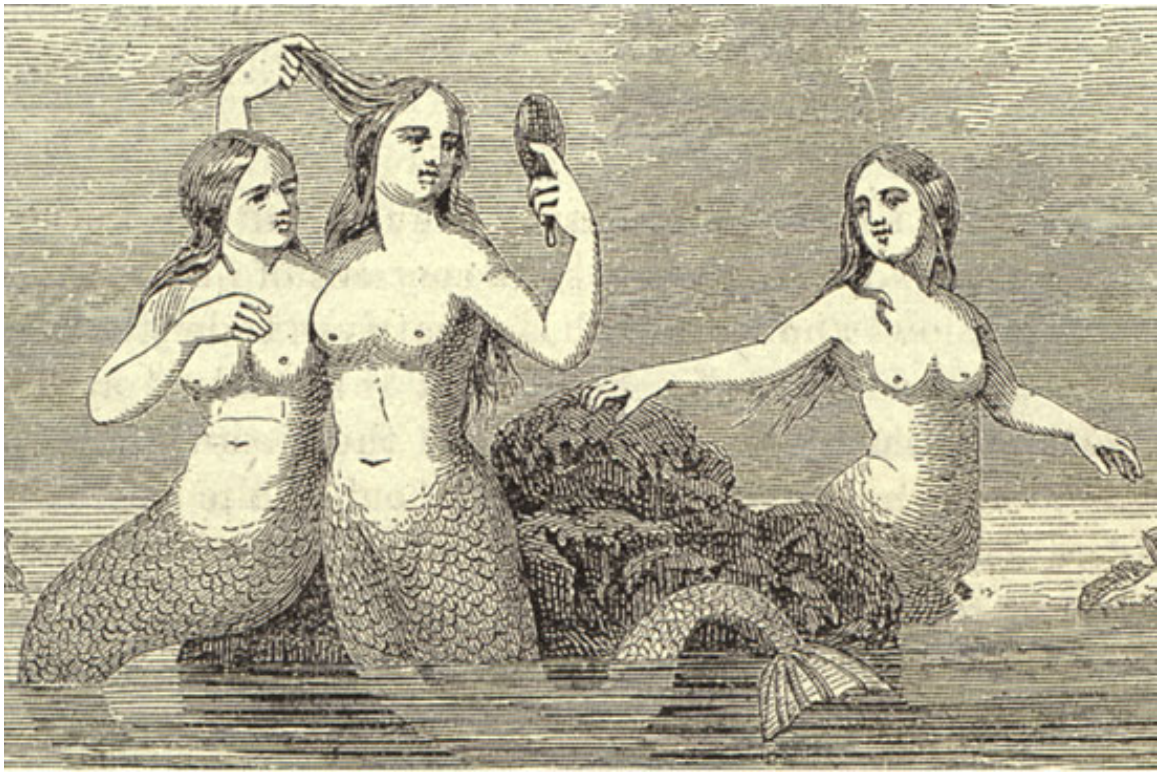

Illustration 1 One of the images Barnum used to advertise the mermaids.
http://chnm.gmu.edu/lostmuseum/lm/352/

Instead of the majestic, fairytale creature that the advertisements promised, the thousands of visitors who flocked the exhibit saw a hideous, desiccated monkey torso ingeniously affixed to a fish's tail. While he later regretted "puffing" the mermaid so vigorously in advertisements, Barnum knew his audience. Rather than be outraged that the advertisements misled them, the tension between expectation and reality only enhanced the mermaid's appeal. Over the next week, people continued to pour in to the Concert Hall, eager to see this creature and evaluate its veracity. Surviving, first-hand accounts of the mermaid exhibit are rare, but Barnum shares several telling anecdotes in his autobiography. The mermaid sat in the midst of the concert hall, surrounded by preserved platypus, flying fish, and other "connecting links." Levi Lyman was there, playing the part of Dr. Griffin and regaling the crowd with stories of his travels and explaining how he acquired each of the animals. Visitors were free to listen to him or to wander around and examine the specimens.

On one occasion, Barnum watched an old Dutchman, drawn in by the beautiful mermaid printed on the advertising transparencies, pronounce the exhibition "the poorest show I ever *did* see." On another, a group of young students lifted the enclosing glass case and placed a cigar in the mermaid's mouth while "Dr. Griffin's" back was turned. More visitors approached, and Lyman launched into his usual speech without noticing the cigar—until someone in the crowd asked if the mermaid died smoking that same cigar. The mortified Lyman was speechless, amusing the group crowded around him. Barnum related only accounts of *dissatisfied* visitors in his memoir, which solidifies the importance of doubt in this exhibit.

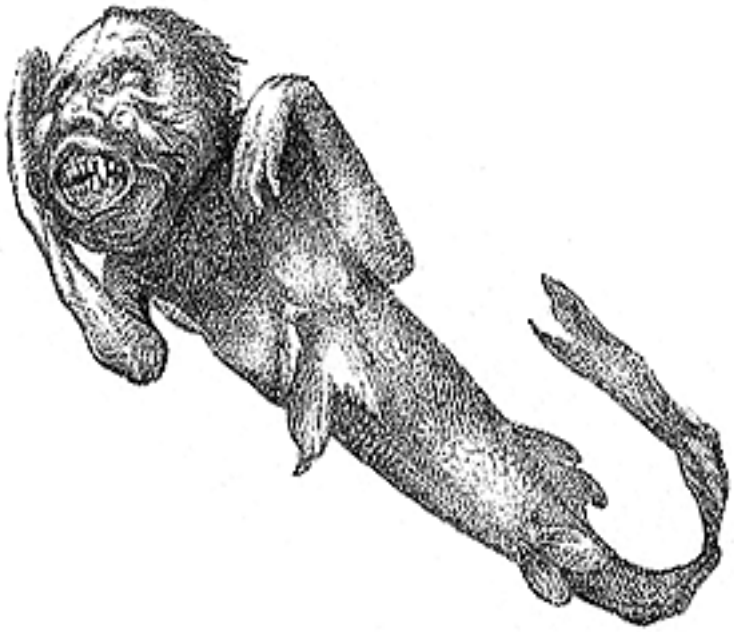

Illustration 2 The *Sunday Herald* published this rendering of the mermaid in 1842. Unlike their northern counterparts, southerners did not have the benefit of accurate images, so the creature that appeared in Charleston must have been especially horrifying and disappointing. http://chnm.gmu.edu/lostmuseum/lm/39/

By the end of the week, Barnum moved the mermaid and other animals to his museum. There, the mermaid continued to draw a remarkable crowd for over a month, more than doubling the museum's profits from the month before. To "puff up" the move, Barnum flooded New York papers with advertisements. "Flattered by the immense patronage bestowed upon this establishment by a discerning public…the Manager is happy to announce that he has, at a most extraordinary expense, made arrangements" to display the mermaid, the authenticity of which had been averred by "hundreds of

Naturalists and other scientific gentlemen."[27] Ticket sales to the American Museum doubled during the Mermaid's first exhibition.

A year later, the FeeJee Mermaid made another New York appearance, this time to compete with Barnum's rival, Peale's New York Museum and its "Fud-Ge Mermaid." To entice visitors to see his own exhibit, Barnum used the now-familiar tactic of stoking public doubt by emphasizing the controversy surrounding the FeeJee mermaid's veracity. The "naturalists and scientific men who have examined it assert that it is absolutely the work of Nature. Others, however, insist that its existence is a natural impossibility. When doctors disagree, the PUBLIC must decide."[28] Calling scientific authorities into question not only encouraged public doubt, but it also tapped into Jacksonian period nationalist and anti-intellectualist currents.[29]

More than it amused or educated, the FeeJee mermaid invited discussion and disagreement. Today, it is perhaps unimaginable that the "PUBLIC must decide" any scientific question, but the American Museum operated at a time when it was still

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27 *New-York Daily Tribune,* August 15, 1842. A similar ad ran on August 24, 1842, promising to run the exhibit for yet another week—at great expense to Barnum, of course.

28 *New-York Daily Tribune,* September 11, 1843.

29 Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity,* chapters five and six describe the overlap of anti-intellectualism, the rise of print as a medium of disseminating information, and increasing sovereignty of religious people to circumvent institutional authority and engage in religious practices independently. Thus, marketplace skepticism tapped into the same kinds of institutional and authoritarian skepticism that religious people were engaging in during the antebellum period. As I will argue in other chapters, skeptics and believers alike often engage in similar kinds of skeptical thinking but towards different ends. Similarly, Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 58, argues that the political divide between those who supported federal government sponsored public education and those who supported local education led to a form of anti-intellectualism that privileged the self-educated as opposed to the college educated.

possible to be an educated, "scientific" person without a formal education. Organized, institutional, and specialized scientific research did not begin in earnest until after the Civil War. In the antebellum period, the formally educated and the autodidact alike could participate in the advancement of knowledge, without necessarily specializing in one area. Americans at this period were especially concerned with natural history because it struck several chords: pride in the American landscape, international scientific legitimacy, and most importantly utilitarianism.[30] Scientific magazines encouraged readers to take interest in the natural world, and the middle class in particular exercised their curiosity about the world around them.[31] Jacksonian period Americans were also increasingly inclined to distrust institutional authorities, including both priests and men of science.[32] It was precisely this interest that Barnum tapped into with his mermaid ads, and it was the commonly held belief that the average citizen could argue against a scientist and win that made the mermaid an irresistible curiosity.

After a short exhibition period in 1842, Barnum sent the mermaid on a national tour. While most towns received it with the same good spirits as New Yokers, southerners had a very different reaction. Incensed by the mermaid, a South Carolinian clergyman-naturalist by the name of Bachman publicly threatened to destroy the mermaid

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30 Alexandra Oleson and Sanborn C. Brown, eds. *The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early American Republic: American scientific and learned societies from colonial times to the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) xvii-xx.

31 Margaret Welch, *The Book of Nature: Natural History in the United States, 1820-1875* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998).
Also, John C. Greene, *American Science in the Age of Jefferson* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1984).

32 Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason*, 58.

and the ornithorhinchus, both of which he believed to be fake. Mermaid believers responded with their newspaper ads defending the creature. The Bachman camp shot back, and the rivalry quickly became a matter of honor. When Bachman and his supporters threatened to burn the mermaid, Lyman surreptitiously sent it back to New York and made his own timely escape.

The Charleston controversy indicates that Barnum successfully situated the mermaid in an epistemologically liminal space. For Bachman and likeminded people, God's creation was a perfectly ordered and unbroken chain. Bachman and his supporters believed that they had unmasked Dr. Griffith and his act as more than just a Yankee fraud. In this epistemological setting, she was so anomalous to the contemporary cosmology that she bordered on heretical. Combined with southern honor culture and economic rivalries between the North and the South, unmasking the mermaid's heresy sealed her fate in the South. By contrast, northerners were more likely to criticize the exhibit, e.g., the dissatisfied Dutchman, or engage in harmless unmasking pranks, e.g. the students and the cigar. Whether she was in the North or the South, the mermaid invited people to participate in the practice of pecuniary skepticism because her cosmological significance was vague.

Barnum learned to exploit epistemological liminality in his first public humbug, the 161-year-old slave woman called Joice Heth. Heth's previous owner had unsuccessfully tried to exhibit her, but Barnum turned Heth into a success. He did so by appealing to nationalism, curiosity, and middle class values. He claimed that Heth was George Washington's nurse, and during exhibitions she would tell stories about "little

George" and the Revolution. Like the mermaid, Heth's blackness put her in a gray area between human and inhuman, while her age put her between the religiously devout "good old days" and the chaos of modernity. Finally, at twenty-five cents for adults and half that for children, the exhibit was cheap enough for working class families to afford. Although it was priced for the working class, Barnum mimicked middle class established. For example, he advertised "a female in continual attendance" to escort unaccompanied "ladies."[33] In the antebellum period, the "female" signaled a servant while "lady" signaled an upper class woman. By using such terminology, Barnum was symbolically including all of his audience in the more respectable social classes.

Heth herself was a popular exhibit for a short time in 1835, but it was the media frenzy surrounding Heth that transformed Barnum a household name. When Heth's popularity began to wane a few weeks after her exhibit opened, Barnum sent an anonymous letter to a New York paper declaring that Heth was humbug. She was not 161 years old—in fact, she was not even human. She was an automaton "made up of whalebone, india-rubber, and numberless springs ingeniously put together." Attendance spiked and visitors came to peer closely at the old woman, looking for gears, levers, and hoses, discussing among themselves whether the woman really was an automaton. Barnum made this claim because the exhibit that immediately preceded Joice Heth was Maelzel's Automaton Chess Player, popularly known as the Turk.

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[33] Joice Heth poster. J. Booth & Son, 147 Fulton St NY - Somers Historical Society P.O. Box 336, Somers NY 10589. Can also be seen: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joice_Heth#/media/File:Joice_heth_poster.jpeg.

The Turk was a popular exhibit in its own right, and visitors flocked to see the mechanical master defeat advanced chess players in public matches. Like the FeeJee Mermaid and Joice Heth, the Turk's popularity hinged upon its liminality. First, the automaton was dressed in a turban and tunic, physically placing it at the periphery of the Western world. Second, the Turk's chess talent and mechanics situated it at the limits of human technical abilities. Visitors speculated on how the automaton worked or if it was an automaton as well.[34] By situating Heth at the limits of both natural possibility and artificial possibility, Barnum taught pecuniary skepticism by inviting visitors to come in and decide for themselves where she belonged in the cosmology.[35]

To summarize, there were a variety of reasons that people would be especially interested in the FeeJee Mermaid. First, in the antebellum period, science was not yet the realm of the specialist, and the public was questioning the authority experts of all varieties. Barnum's invitation for the public to decide was genuine, and they would have taken it as such. Second, the American Museum, the space in which the mermaid was housed for the majority of its time in New York, was designed to invite people into the process of discovery, debate, and doubt. The mermaid fit into the antebellum cosmology, *viz*. the great chain of being, but at the same time it was anomalous because it did not fit

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34 James Cook, *Arts of Deception*, chapter 1.

35 Barnum, *Life of Barnum*, 155-159 and 172-175. The curiosity of Joice Heth did not end with her death. Some years later, when Joice Heth passed away, skeptics performed an autopsy and submitted a report to a newspaper claiming Heth was no more than eighty years old. Barnum's partner in the endeavor, Levi Lyman of FeeJee Mermaid fame, convinced another newspaper that the woman who had been autopsied was not Heth at all—the real Joice Heth had retired and was still alive. The skeptics who performed the autopsy responded publicly, and Lyman shot back with an even bigger humbug and published it in the papers.

perfectly into that system. It provided an epistemological grey area into which the visitor could critically engage and look for human agency at work behind a proposed miracle of nature. On top of her liminality and the doubt that Barnum encouraged, the mermaid was paid exhibit. The financial element gave visitors an extra incentive to be suspicious of the mermaid's authenticity. As a result, the FeeJee Mermaid exhibit modeled in pecuniary skepticism that focused on the boundaries between natural and artificial, curiosity and quackery.

THE AMERICAN MUSEUM

In many ways, the FeeJee Mermaid exhibit was emblematic of the American Museum. In fact, the mermaid was the first major exhibit at the museum, since Barnum had purchased the museum hardly nine months prior. Before buying the museum, Barnum experimented with a number of jobs, including travelling showman, partner in a business selling dubious-quality bootblack, general store owner, and lottery proprietor. The American Museum was for sale when Barnum was in desperate need of a stable, reliable career. He had a family but no livable land back in Connecticut, and even if he had, he considered himself "lazy" by nineteenth century standards—meaning he was unwilling to farm or work with his hands. He needed a job that would keep him interested and allow him to exercise his unique talents. The American Museum was the perfect opportunity to do so. Barnum secured a loan for the property. In his memoirs, Barnum was careful to point out that he intended only to eat cold meals until the museum was paid off; he would only allow himself to enjoy a hot meal after he had gotten out of debt. Until then, he would work tirelessly to promote the museum and make it profitable.[36]

Barnum purchased the American Museum at the opportune moment in American history, as well. There were two types of museum proprietors in the early national period: entrepreneurs seeking profit and natural history societies seeking to elevate the populace.

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36 Barnum did, in fact, inherit a small piece of land called Ivy Island from his grandfather Phineas Taylor, after whom he was named. For the first part of his life, Barnum's family and neighbors promised that this land would make him wealthy as a prince. As it turned out, the land was an inaccessible marsh, utterly valueless. It was one of many pranks played on him by his family and neighbors. On Barnum's dealings to acquire the museum and his vow not to eat hot meals until it was paid off, see Barnum, *Life of Barnum*, 215-223.

Both had the similar goal of providing what was widely called "rational entertainment," that is, entertainment that was simultaneously amusing, educational, and utilitarian. In the 1830s and 1840s, however, ticket sales began to slump and entrepreneurs added music, theater, curiosities, and other attractions to keep their businesses profitable. Thus, Barnum bought the American Museum right as it was becoming increasingly acceptable to diversify a museum's exhibits, but the public still expected that "rational" portion would be present.[37]

Although the museum was a place of learning, it was also one in which natural discovery, whimsical entertainment, and outright humbug could exist side by side. Though many visitors went to the American Museum to see the mermaid, they were encouraged to wander the museum and explore the other exhibits, which was how Barnum justified the humbug to himself. "If I have exhibited a questionable dead mermaid in my Museum," he wrote, "it should not be overlooked that I have also exhibited" interesting and veracious things, "and I should hope that a little 'clap-trap' occasionally, in the way of transparencies, flags, exaggerated pictures, and puffing advertisements, might find an offset in a wilderness of wonderful, instructive, and amusing realities."[38] Barnum's ads encouraged doubt and curiosity, and as a result the museum became place for people to see thousands of curiosities and pronounce authenticity or unmask fakes for themselves.

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37 William T. Alderson, *Mermaids, Mummies and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992), chapter 2.
38 Barnum, *Life of Barnum*, 225.

The American Museum's location offers some insight into the kinds of people who visited. The museum lay at the geographic crossroads of New York's working class neighborhood and its upper class neighborhood, and Barnum's museum acted as a bridge between the two. The museum's Ann Street location brought visitors to the intersection of two notorious thoroughfares. On the one side, there was Broadway. Broadway led through the wealthy Fifteenth Ward, and after 1847, the street led to the Astor Place Opera House. On the other side of the museum, though, was Chatham Street. Chatham traversed the Bowery neighborhood, notorious for a riotous theater and its plethora of saloons, brothels, and flophouses, all of which catered to the working class.[39]

In the decade following Barnum's purchase of the museum, the upper and middling classes moved uptown, away from the museum. By the 1860s, the American Museum was no longer at the symbolic midpoint between the working class and thee wealthier classes; instead, it was a destination, a place to which you had to travel. Moreover, by then it was in the warehouse district that bordered the poor neighborhoods. By the 1860s, Barnum was struggling to maintain decorum at the museum. He posted house rules, sent letters to the paper warning undesirables away, and even hired plainclothes detectives to ensure all visitors adhered to middle class rules of politeness.[40] Although Barnum strove to maintain a level of respectability more redolent of New Yorkers living on the Broadway side of his museum, he targeted the Bowery crowd, and especially those who had designs for social advancement.

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39 Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 91.

40 Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 112-113.

Barnum designed his museum with the emerging middle classes and more "respectable" working classes in mind. By the time the museum opened its doors in 1842, there were more and more men like Barnum moving to New York City: landless, jobless, and seeking to navigate new economic straits. Elsewhere in the northeast, mill towns were attracting not only young women, but also landless men who sought new ways to provide for their families. Men's inability to provide for their families, coupled with the plentiful supply of cheap, hard alcohol led to alcoholism, abuse, neglect, and abandonment.[41] As a result of demographic shifts in the hinterlands and immigration from abroad, the population of New York City grew by over five-hundred percent between the 1780s and the 1830s. The city's passive government and limited infrastructure could not handle such a massive influx of people, especially the tens of thousands of destitute and working poor flocking to the city. Upper class new Yorkers tried a variety of methods to reassert social order, including temperance movements, benevolent societies, and the moralization of class values through religious rhetoric.[42] Religious revivals outside the city likewise attempted to control an increasingly rowdy working class. The families that were able to adapt to the new labor markets aligned themselves with upper class values; particularly, temperance, hard work, and public politeness and against the working class stereotypes of drunkenness, laziness, and rudeness. These economic, religious, and social forces gradually worked together to

41 Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch*, 18-19, embodies this phenomenon perfectly.
42 Raymond Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783-1825*.

create a new societal class, distinguished not necessarily by land ownership but by values.[43]

Barnum made his museum assessable to the upwardly mobile working class, and he crafted advertisements, exhibitions, and publicity stunts to entice them. The twenty-five cent admission fee was pricey, but ultimately within the means of many working class people in New York.[44] Unlike his upper class competitors, Barnum offered as much entertainment and spectacle as he did education, and he unceasingly "puffed up" his various exhibits. Barnum's publicity stunts further attracted working class visitors. In one case, for example, Barnum advertised free music outside the American Museum. He then hired the worst band he could find to fill the streets with cacophonous music. Soon, patrons were paying the twenty-five cent admission fee just to escape the assault on their ears.[45] Barnum also advertised heavily for specifically working class holidays such as the Fourth of July.[46] There were also saloons—though, after 1851, no alcohol—in the American Museum, which allowed visitors to spend even more time in a clean and comfortable environment for the price of a ticket. The hodgepodge of curiosities inside

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43 For an overview of the process of middle class development, see Sellers, *Market Revolution in Jacksonian America,* chapter 8. On how the Methodists in particular coevolved with the market revolution and became a distinctly middle class religion, see Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm,*180-184. For a Marxist reading of religious revivals, see Paul E. Johnston, *A Shopkeepers Millennium*. On the religio-social coevolution of the middle class, see Richard J. Callahan Jr., Kathryn Lofton, and Chad E. Seales, "Allegories of Progress: Industrial Religion in the United States," *JAAR* (March 2010, Vol. 78, No. 1), 1-39.

44 Alderson, *Mermaids, Mummies and Mastodons,* 35-36.

45 Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 132. His commentary on this stunt: "When people expect to get 'something for nothing' they are sure to be cheated, and generally deserve to be."

46 Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 42.

cultivated an atmosphere of investigation, exploration, and excitement as opposed to the stuffier museums patronized by the upper classes.[47]

Barnum's advertising tactics worked. After the museum burned down in 1865, the *New York Commercial* called it "the most extensively patronized of any place in the country."[48] In a less sympathetic, but nonetheless revealing, review, an anonymous *The Nation* author wrote that most of the crowds visiting Barnum's museum were "disreputable," "vicious and degraded," and the "worst and most corrupt classes of our people."[49] Although the authors' opinions differed, they both agreed: Barnum's museum was immensely popular, especially among the lower classes. The ticket price was low enough that all but New York's poorest citizens could afford it. For working and middle class customers, twenty-five cents was an acceptable price for entertainment.[50] Immigrants also visited Barnum's museum. His St. Patrick's Day celebration, for example, attracted hundreds of Irish customers.[51] Barnum himself believed that most of

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47 For Barnum's descriptions of On working class holidays, see his description of the Fourth of July and St. Patrick's Day in *Struggles and Triumphs*, 136-140 and also below; on saloons and temperance in the museum, *Struggles and Triumphs* 160-161 and below. On the stuffiness of upper class museums, see Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 80.

48 Quoted in Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 76.

49 Quoted in Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 80.

50 Alderson, *Mermaids, Mummies and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum,* 86-87. Compare to woman at Peale's museum who complained about $0.50

51 During one St. Patrick's Day celebration, Irish families spent all day in American Museum traveling from exhibits to saloons and back again. Realizing that these people were not planning to leave until closing, and watching a line form at the entrance, Barnum painted a sign that read, "→ to the egress" and hung it above the back door. Thinking they had missed an animal exhibit, visitors began to pour out of the museum, allowing Barnum to admit more for a quarter a piece. Barnum relates the story in *Struggles and Triumphs*, 138-140. The overtly classist and nativist themes in this story serve to remind us that class was shifting during this period, and part of class

his visitors were from rural areas.[52] Barnum also worked hard to attract women and families to the museum. In 1855, Barnum initiated the first of he famous "Baby Shows," in which mothers would bring their babies to compete for the title of biggest baby, fattest baby, and so on. The mother of the winning baby would receive either a small prize a diploma, a medal; a few lucky mothers won one hundred dollars. These shows were the most popular participatory event at the museum. Significantly, the baby shows advertised that the museum was family-friendly. Known prostitutes were specifically and publically barred from the museum, while "ladies" were encouraged to visit.[53] In the same way that his major humbugs existed in liminal spaces, Barnum situated his museum in a liminal space. Although he intentionally drew in working class crowds, he modeled his museum after antebellum reformist values.

There is one final group for whom the museum was especially appealing: children. Barnum made his museum almost irresistible to children. He gave children half-priced admission, advertised specifically to students on holiday breaks, and put out appeals for boys to bring in mice to feed baby anacondas. Barnum claimed that a third of its 1850 ticket sales were from children. Horatio Alger even had his boy heroes regularly

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definition was the exclusion of undesirable groups, in this case the Irish. It also reminds us that Barnum was hardly a hero of the lower classes.

52 In Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 143, he explains that his museum (and most museums, in fact), survive almost entirely on rural visitors. On page 133-134 of the same memoir, he claimed that he kept his museum open from sunrise to sunset and that those visiting the city would stop by his museum before even checking into their hotels. Knowing P.T. Barnum, it would be safe to assume that this happened at least once, but no more than that.

53 For more analysis of the baby shows, especially the ways in which Barnum negotiated middle class notions of motherhood and domesticity whilst still attempting to turn a profit, see Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 99-111. Barnum's own description of the baby shows can be seen in *Struggles and Triumphs*, 145-147.

visit the American Museum.[54] Barnum often puffed himself up as a benefactor to American children because he offered half priced tickets to a place of "rational amusement." As a result, the American Museum appealed to the kinds of working class families who identified with emerging middle class values. The popularity among children is also significant historically. Barnum's young visitors were among the first naturalized middle class citizens.[55] As they grew up, they would pass the values that they learned at the American Museum on to their children—including keeping an eye out for all kinds of quackery.

Although there is relatively little scholarship on the American Museum, much of what has been written focuses on race. It is clear that blacks were, by and large, not allowed in the museum and several of Barnum's exhibits were charged with complex contemporary racial ideologies. It is difficult, however, to ascribe these things to racism in the modern sense of the word.[56] Although blacks were barred from the museum most

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[54] Such as *Rough and Ready,* the fourth volume of his series entitled *Ragged Dick* about a boot blacks' rise to the middle class. For Barnum and children, see Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 99; for Barnum's role in Alger's fiction, see Hildegard Hoeller,. "Freaks and the American dream: Horatio Alger, P. T. Barnum, and the art of humbug." *Studies in American Fiction* 34.2 (2006): 189-214, http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d1001665x.

[55] Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 10 describes the importance middle class moralizers places on inoculating youth against the dangers of the market, particularly fraud.

[56] Two scholars who have written extensively on P.T. Barnum, Bluford Adams and James Cook, both apply modern views of race and racism to the antebellum period. See, for example, Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, chapter four: "In a culture obsessed with the line between blacks and whites, Barnum used the 'What Is It?' exhibit help fortify the racist tradition of a line between blacks and animals (161)." See also, Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, chapter three. Although Cook's argument also hinges on nineteenth century racism, it is more nuanced than Adams's. According to Cook, the "What Is It?" exhibit came at paradigm shift in the middle class. In the 1830s and 1840s—when the FeeJee Mermaid was popular—members of the middle class strove to define themselves, unambiguously and publicly, with the codes of acceptable middle class conduct. Public signification of middle class values made it easy to identify the authentically middle class

of the time, Barnum set aside times for "respectable colored persons" to visit.[57] Moreover, the museum's theater ran a stage version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Octoroon*, each with overt anti-slavery themes. That Barnum invited "respectable colored persons" indicates that, as a middle class businessman, phenotypical race was less important than class and respectability. He was happy to allow blacks, or the similarly disreputable Irish, into his museum as long as they were respectable and paid their admission fees.

In sum, although we do not know precisely how many minority groups visited the museum, we do know that Irish, blacks, women, country folk, and metropolitans of the lower classes in particular were all invited—provided that they behaved in accordance with a certain set of values: politeness, temperance, industriousness, and, increasingly, pecuniary skepticism. Barnum made those values obvious before visitors ever entered the museum—recall the public prohibitions against prostitutes, for example, and by the 1860s Barnum had posted house rules in the papers and hired plainclothes detectives to police the museum. Once patrons entered the museum, they were bombarded by the values that came to characterize the emerging middle class. These were the same values to which Barnum attributed his own success. He refused himself the luxury of hot meals

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"in the increasingly anonymous environment of the antebellum metropolis." By the 1860s, however, the middle class was more solidly defined, and its membership more comfortable in their status. "What Is It?", which debuted in the 1860, allowed members of the middle class to interact with "lower" forms of humanity in such a way as both to reinforce class difference and "[flirt] with the idea of social formlessness as an attractive end in itself." In other words, Cook convincingly implies that the "What Is It?" exhibit would not have been popular at the time of the FeeJee Mermaid because it challenged class boundaries too much. In my opinion, Cook's analysis hinges too much on racial divides and not class divides.

57 *New York Tribune,* February 27, 1849. An image of this advertisement can be seen here: http://www.lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archives/museumimage5.htm. Accessed 3/5/15.

until he paid off his loan for the museum, for example. Similarly, he worked tirelessly to ensure the museum's success, and he was thoroughly convinced that "[w]hether I should sink or swim depended wholly on my own energy."[58] Although he was never a heavy drinker, he swore off hard liquor entirely in 1851.[59] Through his alignment with polite society, his hard work and self-restraint, his personal and professional acquisitiveness, and his discernment, Barnum found tremendous success. His museum was simultaneously an example of what adherence middle class values could accomplish and a way of propagating them

Museum visitors would have been awed by its sheer size and its diversity of curiosities. By the time fire destroyed the first museum in 1865, Barnum had acquired collections from the failed Peale museum of New York and Philadelphia, as well other curiosities he brought from his European tours with Tom Thumb.[60] This is not to mention the countless objects he acquired in other ways. He also expanded the lecture hall dramatically; by 1865 it was capable of holding three thousand guests and ran several

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58 Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 118.

59 Barnum, *Life of Barnum*, 360-362.

60 Barnum exhibited the unusually small five year old Charles S. Stratton under the name "Tom Thumb," most likely referring to the name of the prototype locomotive first was used in America, which was smaller than its British counterpart. The name came from the size of its wheels and frame relative to the larger British one. In 1830, Tom Thumb raced a horse-drawn wagon. The wagon won due a mechanical malfunction of the locomotive, but the engine nevertheless impressed Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, so they adopted it (For this account, see Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 563). This anecdote is emblematic of how Barnum wove together mechanical progress, humbug, and advertising to create successful exhibits.

shows *per day*.[61] One reason Barnum was so confident that any visitor would get his or her money's worth was the volume of curiosities the museum contained.[62]

Illustration 3 The American Museum before it burned down in 1865. This rare photograph depicts the Broadway entrance circa 1853. http://www.lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archives/museumimage1.htm

As hard as Barnum worked to outfit his museum with interesting objects, he worked even harder to ensure that his presence was always felt. Barnum took great pride

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61 On the collections, see *Struggles and Triumphs*, 119. On the expansion of the lecture hall, see *Struggles and Triumphs*, 120.

62 He says as much in *Struggles and Triumphs*, 125.

in his celebrity, recounting in his memoires that visitors sometimes paid the price of admission just to see the great humbugger in person.[63] Barnum was one of the first businessmen to realize truth in the adage that any publicity is good publicity, and as such he did not mind if people accused him of humbug or charlatanism.[64] He did whatever he could "to arrest public attention; to startle, to make people talk and wonder; in short, to let the world know that [he] had a museum."[65] His name thus became a proverbial raised eyebrow. If something seemed too good to be true or too far out of the ordinary, one asked, "Where's Barnum?"

Because he was known across the nation, he became a role model for middle class values. As one museum pamphlet read, "Prosecute faithfully, as Mr. Barnum has done, the duties that fall to your lot; be vigilant, active, and industrious, as he has been; and, with the smiles of Fortune, you will find your highest hopes crowned with success."[66] Barnum had pamphlets like these printed *en masse* and sold for a low price at the museum so that visitors would take them home and show their friends. The resulting word-of-mouth advertising was invaluable for Barnum, but the upshot was that the values he modeled, including pecuniary skepticism, and the success he embodied spread around the country.

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63 For example, see *Struggles and Triumphs*, 151, in which Barnum makes this claim explicitly, 153 in which a young woman sees Barnum and declares "I have read and heard so much about you and your Museum that I was quite prepared to be astonished." Similarly, on 155, a group of boys point Barnum out as though he were a celebrity, and proclaim him an "awfully rich old cuss."

64 Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 142.

65 Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 151:

66 Quoted in Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 95.

One of the principle ways that the emerging middle class separated themselves from their working class peers was to align with upper class societal values and reject working class values. Barnum himself fit this pattern. Five years after the FeeJee Mermaid's debut, Barnum joined the temperance cause sweeping the nation. In 1850, Barnum signed the infamous "teetotaler pledge," in which he promised to abstain from hard liquor. He then banned liquor sales from his museum and even went so far as to prohibit reentry to the museum for fear visitors would leave, imbibe alcohol, and return intoxicated. In the same way that temperance movements across the nation tried to inculcate the middle class values of restraint and respectability into the working classes, Barnum both modeled proper behavior and created a practice space for it in his museum.

There were other kinds of respectability that the American Museum inculcated. The baby shows and half-priced children's tickets set the museum apart as a place where families were welcome and those inimical to family values were not—recall that prostitutes were explicitly barred from the museum and, significantly, the theater, a place where prostitutes were known to frequent.[67] On his stage, Barnum "abolished all vulgarity and profanity from the stage, and [he] prided [him]self upon the fact that parents and children could attend the dramatic performances in the so-called Lecture Room, and not be shocked or offended by anything they might see or hear." He was particularly concerned "that there should be nothing in my establishment…that could contaminate or corrupt" visitors new to city life.[68] By establishing certain norms,

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67 Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 637.

68 Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs,* 134 and 160.

implicitly and explicitly, Barnum fit the American Museum into the wider trend of public domestication that historians associate with the emergence of the middle class. More specifically, public domesticity was a way of delineating oneself from society's lowest classes. The American Museum therefore attracted the working class, but encouraged temperance, family values, and politeness, all values that would come to define the conduct of the middle class. In the same way that myriad advice manuals taught a generation of young Americans how to be genuinely middle class, Barnum's museum modeled those lessons and provided a practice space for their enactment.[69] There were subtler, internal values that the museum taught as well: acquisition and business savvy, both of which were crucial in an environment in which wealth increasingly defined identity.

Another lesson in middle class behavior that visitors learned from the American Museum was the importance of acquisition, because acquisition was linked to one's success in mimicking middle class mores. Barnum explicitly drew his visitors' attention to the monetary and acquisitive aspects of the museum. When he advertised the FeeJee Mermaid, for example, he wrote that he "at a most extraordinary expense, made arrangements" for the mermaid to come to the museum. In subsequent advertisements for other exhibits, Barnum was careful to include a similar line describing the fantastic expense he incurred to acquire the curiosity in question. Once at the museum, the exhibit would have a plaque or a pamphlet describing, in detail, how Barnum procured the

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69 Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, *xv* describes the anxiety antebellum social climbers felt that they were merely *poseurs*.

object. For some stage exhibits, Barnum would personally tell the elaborate tale of how he succeeded in that particular business deal. The museum, in other words, was a place to celebrate expenditure, acquisition, and business savvy.[70] Part of the experience of seeing the FeeJee Mermaid, as well as the subsequent curiosities at the museum, was determining for oneself whether these acquisitions were worth their "extraordinary expense." At a time when class boundaries were in flux, the physical materials one could buy signaled one's pecuniary success and broadcasted one's taste. The American Museum was an object lesson in reviewing purchases and determining whether they were worth the cost, and thereby unmasking the truly respectable from those attempting to pass.[71]

In all aspects of life—political, economic, religious, and even psychological—Americans were faced with more choices than before.[72] These choices had more than casual significance. Who one voted for, the religion one chose, the way one handled money, and the values one adopted did more than define one as middle class—they had eschatological significance because they pointed towards one's ultimate salvation. That the American Museum echoed many of the same values that evangelical churches propagated does not make the religion polluted or somehow less significant, but instead imbues the museum with even more significance. Visitors sympathetic to these values

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70 Adams, *E Pluribus Brarnum*, 83.

71 Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women,* xv.

72 Daniel Walker Howe, "The Market Revolution and the Shaping of identity in Whig-Jacksonian America" in Noll, *God and Mammon*, 60.

would have understood, instinctively, what the museum and Barnum were modeling and the values they espoused.

Barnum's American Museum was a ritual space in which visitors practiced middle class values, including skepticism. Barnum's museum taught visitors the same lesson he learned in his own business career: hard work and industriousness will result in material wealth *if* one can unmask the charlatan and the confidence man. By pointedly boasting about how much his curiosities cost—and charging visitors twenty five cents to go and decide their authenticity for themselves—Barnum taught patrons to ask themselves if Barnum had gotten his money's worth, or if he had been taken in. The visitors also had to ask if they *themselves* had been fooled. Although the type of humbug changed from year to year, whether it was centenarian slave, a mermaid, or a midget, the lesson in pecuniary skepticism was the same: was this a natural curiosity, or was a human being at work behind the scenes? Or, as a contemporary might have phrased it, "Where's Barnum?"

THE LECTURE ROOM

Barnum's public career—from roughly 1835 until his death in 1891—coincided with an unprecedented diversification of the American religious landscape. Besides the rapid growth of the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, this period also gave rise to a number of Christian movements that challenged Protestant orthodoxy. Besides the Unitarians and Universalists, for example, the Millerites and the Mormons emerged during this period. Swedenborgianism also took root in the first half of the eighteenth century. Other groups sprouted from the metaphysical traditions, including Spiritualism, Mesmerism, and phrenology. Still other groups rejected religion entirely, including the Freethought movement, popularized by Robert Owen (1771-1858)—who later became a Spiritualist—and Fanny Wright (1795-1852).

In the previous section, I argued that Barnum trained his working class patrons in middle class values. Besides temperance, etiquette, and bootstrapping, Barnum also taught his audience to question the supernatural or the extraordinary by asking, "Where's Barnum?", a question that sought to unmask the human at work behind the humbug. In this section, we look at an example of how Barnum applied pecuniary skepticism to the religio-scientific practice of Mesmerism. In this case, Barnum's pecuniary skepticism was an admixture of religious and economic skepticism.

Mesmerism took root in America in the mid-1830s, when the lines between science and the supernatural were still porous. Franz Anton Mesmer's (1734-1815) theories were an admixture of physics and Hermetic metaphysics, being rooted partially in Isaac Newton's theory of universal gravitation and partially in Richard Mead's theory

that astral bodies influenced human health. Like Mead, Mesmer believed that the sun and moon played an important role in the human body. Mesmer went beyond this, though, and posited that the human plane and the astral plane existed in harmony, and that the human mind could transfer energy—which he eventually called animal magnetism—into a subject and thereby realign him or her with the astral plane, thus healing physical ailments. Two of Mesmer's students, the Chastenet de Puységur brothers, linked somnambulism and mesmerism after their own experiments indicated that somnambulism produced clairvoyant effects in subjects. Charles Poyen, a student of these brothers, introduced Mesmerism to the United States in 1836.

Rubens Peale was one of many scientifically minded people who found Mesmerism alluring. Mesmerists demonstrated the system's efficacy again and again through public performances. Mesmerism's Hermetical promise that humans could change their lives through manipulation of energies fit into 1830s epistemologies. Arminian theology, Jacksonian democracy, marketplace freedom, and the proliferation of industrial miracles all taught Americans that progress and salvation was the result of their own hard work, not the sovereign and capricious will of God. Poyen offered Mesmerism as both the promise of material progress—a kind of millennialism in which, through Mesmerism, America would become the greatest nation on earth—and as a connection to a higher plane of existence. By participating in Mesmerism, Poyen taught, one was bettering the world. Or, as Catherine Albanese phrased it, "To trust oneself to the

magnetizer became to trust the world of spirit and the world of mind."[73] Beginning in February of 1841, around the same time that Barnum took ownership of the American Museum, and concluding on December 31, 1841, Rubens Peale became one of many proprietors, disciples, and exhibitioners to display the efficacy of Mesmerism through public performances.[74]

In these performances, a mesmerist—first an English doctor named Robert H. Collyer and then, when Dr. Collyer moved to Barnum's American Museum, Peale himself— mesmerized a woman, putting her in a somnambulant state. The woman was then made to perform various feats to prove she was "in sympathy" with her mesmerizer. Next, the demonstrator asked her impossible questions, which she answered, in order to demonstrate her clairvoyance.[75] Most of the time, the woman would fall into a trance and the audience was duly impressed at the science of Mesmerism. In other performances, according to Barnum at least, the mesmerist failed to produce a trance and Peale's reputation suffered accordingly.[76] In response to his rival, Barnum opened up a Mesmerism exhibit of his own, housed in the American Museum's Lecture Hall.

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73 On Mesmerism, Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 190-195. The quotation is on 195.

74 In *Struggles and Triumphs,* 156, Barnum notes that Peale claimed his museum was a "more 'scientific' establishment than mine, and [Peale] pretended to appeal to a higher class of patrons." Barnum's complaints are well founded—Peale's museum was indeed designed for the upper classes and tended to avoid popular amusements; see Alderson, *Mermaids, Mummies and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum,* 84-86.

75 Edward John Nygren, "Rubens Peale's Experiments with Mesmerism," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 114, no. 2 (April 13, 1970), 100-108.

76 It is impossible to tell whether some of Peale's exhibitions actually failed. Edward J. Nygren notes that many audience members, including doctors and other scientific men, were duly

There were at least two runs of the Mesmerist exhibition at the American Museum. The first run began on April 19, 1841 when Dr. Collyer moved to the American Museum.[77] The second run began in the summer of 1841, and Barnum himself played the mesmerist.[78] As in Peale's exhibit, Barnum used a female to demonstrate Mesmer's process; unlike Peale, though, Barnum used a little girl. He would put the girl in a somnambulistic state. While the girl was asleep, he then had her follow a few simple verbal commands to demonstrate that she was under his control. Next, he would chew either candy or tobacco and, even though her eyes were closed, she could tell which he was chewing, thus demonstrating her clairvoyance. Believers in the audience, Barnum notes in his memoirs, took this as "positive proofs that there was something in mesmerism, and they applauded tremendously." Leaving the girl in her trance, Barnum then invited a male member of the audience onto the stage. Barnum promised to put the audience member into the "same state" as the girl within five minutes or pay him fifty dollars, a massive sum of money given that entrance to the museum was only twenty-five cents.

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impressed. Nygren also points out that Peale performed Mesmerist experiments both publically and privately, and in his memoirs Peale claims to have Mesmerized hundreds of people. Therefore, Barnum's implied criticism of Peale—namely, that he fell for the humbug of Mesmerism—is accurate. On the other hand, given that one of Peale's subjects was a blind woman named Mary Mattock, it is not unreasonable to assume that Peale somehow orchestrated his public demonstrations of clairvoyance.

77 *Commercial Advertiser,* April 19, 1841, in Edward John Nygren, "Rubens Peale's Experiments with Mesmerism," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 114, no. 2 (April 13, 1970), 103.

78 Edward Nygren poins out that Barnum advertises another Mesmerist exhibit in the summer of 1841 and suggests that one of Peale's female subjects went to the American Museum. There is no evidence for this, however, and Barnum's own memoirs contradict the hypothesis, since he says he enlisted a little girl as a subject and not a grown woman, which Peale did. Barnum also listed himself as the mesmerist.

Barnum sat across from his man and attempted to mesmerize him. Only this time, nothing happened. After three tense minutes of failed passes, Barnum took a break and addressed the audience again, "Never mind, I have two minutes more, and meantime, to show that a person in this state is utterly insensible to pain, I propose to cut off one of the fingers of the little girl who is still asleep." He then produced a knife and proceeded to show the audience that it was indeed a real blade. While his back was turned, however, the little girl ran off the stage in terror. The majority of the audience laughed; the mesmerists, however, were shocked. When Barnum turned around to find his little girl missing he cried out, "Why! Where's my little girl?" The audience responed that she had run off when he mentioned cutting off her finger. Barnum feigned surprise, "Then she was wide awake, was she?" The audience affirmed, "Of course she was, all the time." Barnum sprang his trap: "I suppose so; and, my dear sir, I promised that you should be 'in the same state' at the end of five minutes, and as a believe you are so, I do not forfeit fifty dollars." After several weeks of this demonstration, Barnum had "quite killed Peale's 'genuine' mesmerism in the rival establishment."[79]

Barnum's "Mesmerism" show was an attack on an alternate set of middle class values, in which one could be successful without necessarily working hard. Mesmerism promised the possibility of human advancement through manipulation of invisible forces. It appealed to both the scientifically and the metaphysically minded. But for Barnum—

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79 This anecdote can be found in Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 156-158. Barnum's claim to have "killed Peale's 'genuine' mesmerism" is dubious. Peale left the museum entirely in the beginning of 1842 at the behest of his family, and since he was such a strong proponent of Mesmerism, without him the exhibits stopped.

and for many of the emerging middle class—there was always a catch, an angle, or a scam. The world was full of humbugs, in other words, and the most successful people were those adept at unmasking the frauds. While the mock-Mesmerism show mimicked some of the practical jokes of Barnum's early life, it was also more than an elaborate prank. It was a ritual humiliation of those too credulous to see the humbug behind the Mesmerism's extraordinary claims.

A key part of this ritual humiliation ritual was gender. Peale's exhibitions used an adult woman, who the audience would have seen as more susceptible to suggestion than a man.[80] Barnum took this a step further and used a little girl, a potent symbol of both weakness and credulity. As the little girl demonstrated her clairvoyance and other proofs that she was in a somnambulant state, the believers in the audience cheered and applauded. Perhaps even the skeptics were intrigued. Inviting a man on stage—who would have been less susceptible to mesmerism in the audience's eyes—and putting a large sum of money at stake further invited the audience to believe that Mesmerism was a legitimate science. Why, after all, would Barnum risk the equivalent of two hundred paying visitors to his museum if Mesmerism did not work? Barnum further built the tension by trying to mesmerize the man for three minutes. At this point, skeptics were hoping to see Barnum lose his money and believers were hoping to see the man fall into unconsciousness. Both were surprised, though, when the little girl—who mere minutes before seemed entirely under Barnum's control—–ran off stage. The skeptics in the

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80 Nygren, "Rubens Peale's Experiments with Mesmerism," 104. In at least one private demonstration, however, Peale used a female child.

audience laughed uproariously as the girl fled. When it became obvious that Barnum had orchestrated the entire show and that the girl was never mesmerized, the believers' humiliation was complete. Barnum had duped them into applauding and cheering a scam, and after Barnum had unmasked his own role in the scam they realized they were the butt of the joke. By playing upon their credulity and assumptions about gender, Barnum allowed Mesmerists to feel momentarily vindicated, and then he humiliated them in the eyes of the rest of the audience.

The promise of fifty dollars added another layer to the exhibit. After the performance was over, it was clear to the audience that Barnum's money was never in real jeopardy because Barnum knew that the little girl was faking her symptoms. In other words, Barnum knew that Mesmerism was humbug, and anyone who did not know that would have been fooled into thinking that their faith would have pecuniary benefits. The lesson was simple, and it was the same lesson visitors learned simply by paying admission to a Barnum exhibition: when money is involved, one should always be on the lookout for fraud.

Barnum's attack on mesmerism was also an attack on an alternative middle class value set. Mesmerism taught that humans could use religio-scientific techniques to better their lives by connecting practitioners with higher forms of reality. But, as Albanese pointed out, to participate in progress meant that one had to "trust oneself to the magnetizer" and then the whole spirit world. Barnum unmasked the magnetizer as a charlatan and taught people to be skeptical of such broad and seemingly miraculous claims, especially ones that cost money. At the same time, he taught museum visitors that

hard work and sacrifice in this life led to success in this life, without appeals to the supernatural—a message that jibed well with Jacksonian democratic values, Arminian theology, and the lessons of the new market economy.[81]

Barnum's ritual unmasking of the human agency—that is, humbug—at work behind public Mesmerism fits into a broader contemporary discussion about human agency and public religiosity. About one hundred years before the Mesmerism

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81 Later in his life, Barnum was passionate about unmasking all sorts of humbugs. He published *Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally, in All Ages* (New York: Carleton, 1866), in which he unmasks all manner of humbugs. A shopper should be cautious of buying chocolate, for example, because "[c]ocoa is 'extended' with sugar, starch, flour, iron-rust, Venetian-red, grease, and various earths."[81] Bread, milk, whiskey, coffee, tea, and other foodstuffs could likewise be adulterated. To avoid being scammed at the market, Barnum offered this advice: "In short, one good safeguard is, to use, as far as you can, things with their life in them when you buy them, whether vegetable or animal."[81] In the modern world of McDonald's and processed foods, this warning is more salient than ever. Similar examples could be pulled from chapters on doctors, businessmen, traders and even entire markets—Barnum's advice about speculation would, if followed, have prevented the 2008 financial fiasco. In addition to debunking material scams, Barnum also devoted a full third of his book to debunking spiritual humbugs.

In three sections—about the Spiritualist craze of the nineteenth century, about witches and haunting, and one entitled "Religious Humbugs"—Barnum modeled a strictly materialist skepticism for his readers. In the first section, for example, Barnum debunks the day's most famous spiritualists one by one. The Davenport brothers, for example, purported to be spirit mediums. To prove that they were not making the sounds of spirit manifestation themselves, the brothers tied themselves up. Despite their apparent incapacitation, Barnum averred that "the Davenports always untie themselves by using their hands; as they are able in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, however impossible it may seem, to release their hands by loosening the knots next their wrists."[81] And, although Barnum did not know how the Fox sisters made the tapping sounds, he had it on good authority that the sisters were faking, and himself had seen another person produce the same "rapping" sound without appealing to the spirits.[81] Barnum ended his chapter on spirit mediums by issuing a challenge to the famous spiritualist J.V. Mansfield. Mansfield urged his followers to send in questions addressed to the spirits in sealed envelopes, which the spirits would read and answer without ever opening the envelope. The petitioner would receive the answer in the still-sealed envelope by return mail. Barnum's challenge was simple: "I will write a series of questions addressed to one of my spirit-friends, inclose them in an envelope, and if Mr. Mansfield or any other professed medium will answer those questions pertinently in my presence, and without touching the envelope, I will give to such party five hundred dollars, and think I have got the worth of my money." *Humbugs of the World,* 155-159 and 84-88.

exhibitions, eighteenth century revivalist Jonathan Edwards, who attributed all of the effects of the revivals to God's direct influence, described the 1735-1736 revivals in New England as "a very *extraordinary* Dispensation of Providence: God has in many Respects gone out of, and much beyond his usual and *ordinary Way*."[82] Compare that to Charles Finney, who vehemently stressed in his 1835 *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* that a revival of religion was "not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much as any other effect produced by the application of means." Although God blessed revivals, God did not directly cause them because "[t]here is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature."[83] Revivals, in other words, were no longer "special dispensations," they were socially engineered. Finney's claim that revivals were manufactured made theological sense in the antebellum period in a way it would not have a century before. In Arminian theology, salvation was the result of individual choice, whereas in Jonathan Edwards's strictly Calvinist theology, God alone determined one's ultimate fate. Finney's exciting revivals and emphasis on personal sovereignty made him popular throughout the nation, but his popularity also made his revivalism techniques easy targets for criticism.

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82 Jonathan Edwards, *A faithful narrative of the surprising work of God in the conversion of many hundred souls in Northampton and the neighbouring towns and villages of New-Hampshire in New-England: in a letter to the Reverend Dr. Benjamin Colman of Boston* (Edinburgh : Reprinted for J. Oswald book-seller in London, 1737), 24.

83 Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 12-13. The comparison between Edwards and Finney was effectively drawn by William McLoughlin in his notes to Charles Finney's *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 13 note 7.

A key theme among critics, which echoes Barnum's Mesmerism humbug, was that masking false religion with supposed miracles gave revivalists the veneer of authenticity.

One such critic was Orville Dewey (1794-1882), who was born into a Calvinist family but broke with the tradition and became a Unitarian minister. He was also well educated and wealthy, and his criticisms therefore reflect some of the fears of the upper classes. For example, writing in the guise of an English traveler, Dewey "intimated that there is contrivance" in revivals. He did not mean outright "trick or cunning," but it was "quite evident that the promoters of these Revivals are not altogether willing to leave them to that divine power of which they so confidently boast." The great danger in the revivals, Dewey went on to write, was that they promoted partisanship, divided churches, and left some Christians, who were not stirred by revivals, feeling forsaken.[84] Calvin Colton (1789-1857), a Yale College and Andover Seminary graduate and former revivalist, turned against the tide of revivalism after coming to believe that revivals did more harm than good. Though God may have converted some people's hearts through revivals, Colton argued, "their reasoning powers…have been *broken down* by man." Without the mind's full faculties, the convert's intellect, conscience, and moral character were all damaged. When the revival preacher left, the whole community would realize they had been manipulated and abandon religion entirely. Colton longed for the days of Jonathan Edwards, when revivals were God-given. The kind revivalism that had "been

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84 Orville Dewey, *Letters of an English Traveler to His Friend in England, on the "Revivals of Religion" in America* (Boston: Bowles and Dearborn, 1828), in James D. Bratt, ed., *Antirevivalism in Antebellum America: A Collection of Religious Voices* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 81-91. Quotation on 84.

recently and widely introduced to this country, which seems to be based upon a theory that can dispense with Divine influence and substitute the power of man…are an entirely new state of things; they are, as seems to me, the work of man and not of God."[85] Like other anti-revivalists, these two men delegitimized revivals by unmasking the human agent behind the supernatural facade. Moreover, their ties with the upper class further separated revivalist behaviors and ideology from the emerging middle class social mores; a gap which would become solidified in the next half-century.[86]

In "Anti-Revivalism in Antebellum America," James D. Bratt argues that anti-revivalists sounded concerns that came to define postbellum middle class society.[87] For example, critics complained that revivals encouraged breeches in public decorum. "Enthusiasm," as it was called, was not only linked with adulterated, impious religion, but also with inappropriate social behavior. Enthusiasm, in short, was for the working class. One critic, the Restorationist Reverend George W. Elley (1801-1884), described revival-goers in these terms: "They literally, and without a figure, jumped and yelled, and barked, groaned and grunted, howled and screamed, cried and laughed, and tumbled and rolled over one another, men, women, and children, as if reason had been entirely dethroned and the mind had become a chaos." Elley went on to assert that "[m]odes of *Christian worship* and modes of *Methodistic conversion* are very different things" and he

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85 Calvin Colton, *Thoughts on the Religious State of the Country: With Reasons for Preferring Episcopacy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836) in Bratt, *Antirevivalism*, 95-101. Quotations on 99 and 101, respectively.

86 For more on anti-revivalists concerns about the human manipulation behind revivalism, see James D. Bratt "Anti-Revivalism in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Spring, 2004), 74,

87 James D. Bratt, "Anti-Revivalism in Antebellum America," 65-106.

compared a "Catholic's self-flagellations" to "a Methodist's screaming unto God," and he noted that "God has, neither by precept nor precedent, enjoined us to do either."[88] The separation of Methodist worship and Christian (read: Protestant) worship, followed by the comparison to Catholicism implies that, because of its enthusiasm, Methodism was an inferior religious practice. Elley, a Restorationist, believed that Christian worship should be simple, as he believed it was in the early church. It is thus unsurprising that he would be opposed to enthusiasm on theological grounds. But for the working class, Elley and other critics sent an important message: to align oneself with the upper classes, one must eschew working class behavior. Thus, one way to identify as middle class became to reject enthusiasm. Another critic, Albert Baldwin Dod, made this point explicit.

In Dod's writing, Charles Finney symbolized stand the entire system of revivalism, the theology and methodology of which was "bad in all its parts, root, trunk branches, and fruit…[and] will spread desolation and ruin, and ages yet to come will deplore the waste of God's heritage." The fault in Finney's enthusiastic system was not only that it abnegated the need for God, which for the devoutly Calvinist Dod was heresy, but also that it pandered to the masses, who were in currently "in such a state of agitation that the lightest breath may make [them] heave and foam." Instead of giving into enthusiasm, Dod argued, the church should "allay this undue excitement of the human mind, to check its feverish outgoings towards earthly objects, and to teach it without hurry or distraction, in self-collectedness, to put forth its energies in a proper direction

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88 George Elley, "Methodistic Enthusiasm," in the collection by James D. Bratt, *Anti-Revivalism in Antebellum America,* 6 and 9.

and to their best advantage."[89] Like Elley, Dod believed that to engage in enthusiastic worship was to practice an inferior form of Christianity and participate in working class behavior. Both Elley—a Restorationist—and Dod—a Calvinist—had unique theological foundations for making their attacks. Despite their differences, both of them connected anti-revivalism to the middle class values of restraint and respectability while simultaneously unmasking human efforts masquerading as supernaturalism. Barnum's Mesmerism exhibition was a ritual performance of anti-revival critiques. Instead of written arguments, however, Barnum revealed the human trickery behind Mesmerism and inculcated into the emerging middle classes a skepticism of supernaturalism through pecuniary skeptical practices.

Like the rest of the museum, the Lecture Hall was a training ground of middle class values. Despite its name, the Lecture Hall was more of a cross between a theatrical stage and a lyceum. Barnum most likely chose the name "Lecture Hall" instead of Lyceum to signal that this was a rational amusement to his Christian working class customers, who would have shunned a theater. At the same time, the name would not have alienated them like lyceum might have, since lyceum signals a more highbrow exhibit. Finally, the name distanced Barnum's stage from the more bawdy theaters of the Bowery, with which his stage actually had much in common.[90] In short, the very name "Lecture Hall" was designed to emulate upper class values and distance visitors from working class entertainments of the Bowery neighborhood.

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89 Albert Baldwin Dod "Finney's Sermons" and "Finney's Lectures," in Bratt, *Anti-Revivalism*, 27 and 21, respectively.

90 Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 118.

Through his choice of performances, Barnum modeled middle class social, racial, and gender norms. Moreover, it was common for theatrical performances to impart some moral lesson, and as a result Barnum's audience would have entered a Lecture Hall play with appropriate expectations.[91] In the mid 1840s, Barnum asked his friend Moses Kimball—the original owner of the FeeJee Mermaid—for permission to run *The Drunkard: or, The Fallen Saved, A Moral Drama in Five Acts*. *The Drunkard* went on to become the most popular temperance play of the era and, arguably, the most popular play before the stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The play models the same set of values that Barnum's museum: temperance, hard work, domesticity, and restraint. The version Barnum used also made overt references to specific New York neighborhoods and appropriate class behavior. The play's protagonist, for example, gets thrown out of a bar on Broadway for being too loud. The next scene finds him fighting outside a bar in the Five Points neighborhood.[92] Although the play was more overtly Christian than Barnum's Museum, the tenor of that religiosity was closer to the restrained, middle class dignity of the Unitarians, Episcopalians, or later Methodists than the enthusiastic and leveling religiosity of the early Methodists. While *The Drunkard* modeled temperance,

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91 Susan L. Porter, *With an Air Debonair: Musical Tehatre in America 1785-1815* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 294: "The theatre was often referred to as a school for manners and morality," and many American theaters admitted children for half-price on nights when morality plays were exhibited.

92 The full play, as it appeared in Barnum's Lecture Hall, can be found on the University of Virginia's "Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture" webpage, http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sentimnt/drunkardhp.html, accessed 3/30/2015. The scenes in question are in act II, scenes 3-4.

restraint, and hard work to working class audiences, anti-slavery plays modeled the emerging racial order.

Abolitionist plays such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Octoroon* were frequently performed in the Lecture Hall, and despite their overtly anti-slavery themes they nevertheless propagated a racial hierarchy that would come to define the middle class. During intermissions and between acts, Barnum often had singers, jugglers, and other performers entertain the audience. The most overt—and paradoxical—example of mixing anti-slavery and highly racialized ideologies occurred between acts of an anti-slavery entitled *The Octoroon*, during which Barnum exhibited "What Is It?" as a way of solidifying racial hierarchies.[93]

In at least two runs of "What Is It?", one in 1845 and then again in 1860, Barnum advertised that the "Man Monkey" as the connecting link between man and monkey. Thus, "What Is It?" struck the same scientific and skeptical chords as the FeeJee Mermaid. Unlike the mermaid, however, "What Is It?" also inculcated middle class respectability and race values at an especially tense period of history. Barnum specifically chose to exhibit "What Is It?" between the acts of the *Octoroon* in order to dampen the overtly anti-slavery themes of the play. In the same ads for "What Is It?," Barnum also announced a waxwork exhibit of John Brown—highlighting him as a criminal and a villain as opposed to a righteous crusader. As tensions over slavery mounted in the months after Harper's Ferry, Barnum tried to toe the line without alienating potential customers. In doing so, Barnum participated in the racialization of the

93 Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 160-163.

class hierarchy. Not only was Barnum placing blacks in an inferior social position whites, but he was also making that stratification part of the middle class ideology. Notice in the advertisement below that "What Is It?" is surrounded by a nuclear family. The man in the back left is possibly the exhibit's "keeper" or "protector" who allegedly caught the "Man Monkey" in Africa.[94] The sub-human, black figure is on a plane beneath the white family and needs the protection of the whites. Thus, the "Man Monkey" encouraged the same kind of supernatural and pecuniary skepticisms as the FeeJee Mermaid with an added layer of middle class racial ideology. Together, these elements contributed to an emerging white, middle class respectability in which skepticism—that is, questioning the veracity of religio-scientific claims—played an important role.

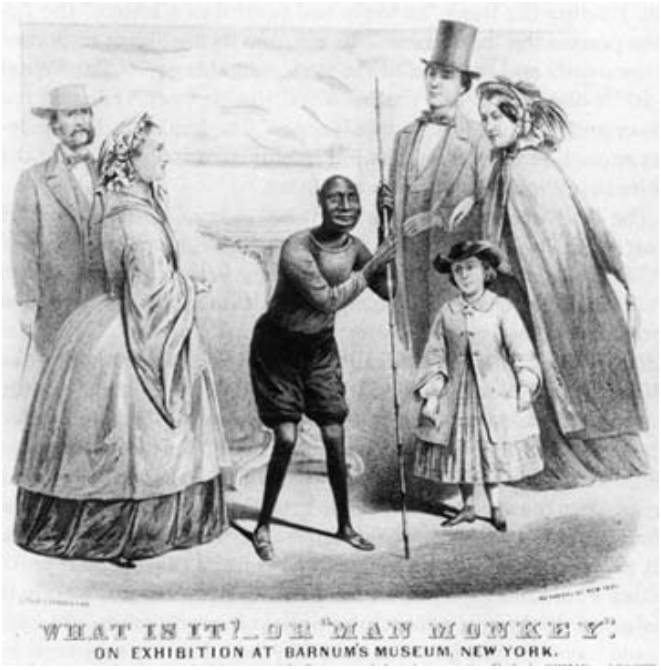

Illustration 4 Advertisement for "What Is It?"

94 Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 157-161.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, consider a short anecdote called "The Man Who Got Humbugged," which appeared in newspapers nationwide during the height of Barnum's notoriety in the 1850s and continued appearing during the following decades. In this short, probably fictional story, a man described his disappointing experience at Barnum's exhibition. He wanted to see Jenny Lind, a singer Barnum had "puffed," but she was not there. He expected Barnum's wild animals to be gigantic, but they were of average size. The man who could fiddle with his toes, Tom Thumb, the lion tamer—all were fine in their own way, but ultimately they failed to live up to Barnum's hype. Frustrated, the man went found Barnum to complain. "Mr; Barnum," the man said, "I think your show's a darned humbug." Barnum dismissed the complaint in his usual way. If you've paid the admission fee, Barnum replied, then "[y]ou've a perfect right to think just what you please." When his friends asked why the man did not demand his money back, the man replied, "You see the truth is…I didn't pay no quarter—*I crawled in under the canvass*."

The next column in the same newspaper was entitled "Spiritual Rappings." It was about the recent spirit mediums traveling the country. Many saw these mediums demonstrate their strange power, but "none are able to give any satisfactory explanation about the 'why or wherefore.'" The article goes on to describe the various investigations that had been made into the phenomena and the attempts to expose the mediums as frauds. All proved useless. The article ends with a simple question: "What is it?"[95]

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95 *The Spirit of Democracy* (Woodsfield, Ohio), June 09, 1852.

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